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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION REPORT - Iraq - President Bush's
Speech - Press Conference Iran
PARIS - Wednesday, March 22, 2006

(A) SUBJECTS COVERED IN TODAY'S REPORT:

Iraq - President Bush's Speech - Press Conference
Iran

B) SUMMARY OF COVERAGE:

Le Figaro reports on its front page: "Bush on the Defensive" while Le Monde entitles its article "Clear, Hold and Build: The Bush Strategy" (See Part C) while several outlets also carry the news revealed by Time Magazine alleging that U.S. soldiers massacred 23 Iraqi civilians. Le Monde sides with Time: "The reality is that these soldiers, repulsed by the killing of one of their own, went into Iraqi homes killing civilians haphazardly." Liberation titles "New Bungling by the Americans in Iraq." "Once Time published its conclusions, it became clear that the reality did not gel with the first official reports. The U.S. Army has thus opened an investigation."

A small item in Liberation reports that according to Journalists Without Borders, "The Iraq conflict has killed 86 journalists and media personnel. 'Iraq is,' according to the same association, 'the world's biggest kidnapping market.'"

Pascal Riche reports in Liberation on the "cumbersome witness for the prosecution in the Moussaoui trial. Harry Samit, like Sisyphus, relentlessly tried to convince his superiors that Moussaoui was the perfect candidate for a terrorist attack. But like the proverbial rock, his efforts never made it to the top. The prosecution must clearly feel sorry they brought him in to testify." Le Monde reports on the FBI's "criminal negligence."

Iran's nuclear aspirations leads Le Parisien to interview Bruno Tertrais, a strategic issues expert who concludes: "Iran will be able to build a Hiroshima type A-bomb in three to four years. There is absolutely no doubt about Iran's desire to have the bomb. And mainly for reasons of prestige: for Tehran, the nuclear bomb embodies modernity, power and independence. While a military incursion is not in the books, there is no doubt that the Americans have drones flying out of Iraq and Afghanistan to see what is going on in Iran." In his article Henri Vernet asks: "Can Iran Still Be Stopped?" (See Part C) Once again front pages and editorials concentrate on the battle of wills between PM Villepin and the demonstrators over his youth employment legislation. In Liberation Alain Duhamel titles his column "The French Psycho-drama." "The French psycho-drama resides in the fact that everyone is aware of the urgent need to change France's social model but most fear that change. Yet every poll proves that the French are the most anxious and the most pessimistic people in Europe about their future." For Le Figaro's editorialist the present situation is simply "an immense waste." Meanwhile PM Villepin is said not to be ready to change anything to his legislation, "although he is ready to dialogue." Popular right-of-center Le Parisien headlines: "Sarkozy Ready to Abandon Villepin," its conclusion after last evening's meeting between the PM and UMP Parliamentarians. The article suggests Sarkozy may even be considering "leaving the government" so as not to be identified as the minister of the riot police.

Le Figaro carries an op-ed by UN Secretary General on the new Human Rights Council: "We want a Council that works. Despite the differences between my initial proposals and the final resolution, there were no compromises on the main issues. The Council will not close its eyes on violations by certain countries while calling others to order. But of course everything will ride on its members: hence the importance of selecting the Council members."

(C) SUPPORTING TEXT/BLOCK QUOTES:

Iraq - President Bush's Speech - Press Conference
"U.S. President Tries to Defend His Iraq Strategy"
Gilles Biassette in Catholic La Croix (03/22): "For the past

few weeks the White House goal has been to convince the American public that the images filtering through from Iraq do not reflect the reality of the progress achieved on the ground. In order to bolster his vision, at once realistic and optimistic, President Bush used the city of Tal Afar as an example, 'once a bastion of Al-Qaeda, it is today a city of freedom.' In a press conference yesterday, he acknowledged that there was 'difficult combat' but that this was not 'a civil war.'

"Bush Tries to Swim Upstream"

Philippe Gelie in right-of-center Le Figaro (03/22): "What were George Bush's advisors thinking when they decided to improvise a press conference yesterday? Between a speech on the war Monday in Cleveland and another today in West Virginia the American president appears to be on the defensive. and is having a hard time swimming upstream as far as public opinion is concerned. He is relying on arguments used a hundred times over. During his press conference, George Bush had nothing new to say. If George W. Bush has lost so much credibility in the public eye it may be because he refuses to ever admit that he was wrong or to question his actions. Regarding Iran, one has to wonder what impact if any the warnings of such a weakened President can really have."

Iran

"Iranian Bomb Worries the World"

Henri Vernet in right-of-center Le Parisien (03/22): "Iran and its nuclear ambitions are causing concern around the world. There is no doubt, as FM Douste-Blazy said, abandoning for once his natural cautiousness, 'that Iran is pursuing a clandestine military nuclear program.' According to experts, within a few years, Tehran will have the bomb. The Mullahs' motivations are varied: they resent being encircled by American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan; they are jealous of regional powers such as India and Pakistan and they are eager to establish the prestige of Shiites in a Muslim world dominated by a Sunni majority. Also the Mullahs believe that being in the 'exclusive nuclear club' is a guarantee of immunity: the thinking is that Bush is somewhat timid when it comes to dealing with North Korea but went ahead in Iraq because he knew Saddam did not have the bomb. Whether or not we can still contain Iran will depend on whether the international community keeps up a united front. In fact, differences are beginning to emerge at the UNSC. The Europeans still want to believe in diplomacy, whereas the Americans, despite the harsh Iraqi lesson, do not exclude the use of force. As for the Chinese and the Russians, they continue to play their ambiguous game, and Iran, with its oil reserves has a few trump cards up its sleeve." STAPLETON